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SUBJECT: CROATIAN GOVERNMENT PREPARED FOR FLU OUTBREAK;
FOUR REPORTED DEATHS TO DATE

¶1. (U) Summary: The Croatian government is fully prepared to deal with increasing cases of H1N1 and other seasonal influenza as the outbreak spreads throughout the country. Public health officials urged the public not to panic and to take precautions to prevent further influenza spread. However, local media is not helping and its coverage is increasing Croatians' concern about infection. The GoC has procured vaccines and is prepared to staff hospitals and clinics with sufficient medical personnel to accommodate any surge in cases. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The Ministry of Health has been issuing daily reports with statistics involving the spread of H1N1. They report a total of four deaths, two in Split and two in Zagreb, of individuals from H1N1 related illness. The two Split deaths and one of the Zagreb deaths were those of individuals suffering from previous medical conditions. However, the latest death reported in Zagreb was that of an allegedly 'healthy' 33 year old who died from H1N1 related illness. The Ministry also reported 21 more cases on November 12 bringing the total number of infected persons to 547. There are an additional 2,327 cases of influenza (not laboratory confirmed), bringing the total number to 2,874.

¶3. (U) Croatian health authorities anticipated an increase in influenza infection and took measures to ensure health services were available. Officials recently introduced a special weekend rotation for doctors at clinics and hospitals throughout the country to ensure coverage. The GoC also purchased 1.5 million vaccines reserved for high risk groups such as those suffering from chronic illness, health workers and those who share their household with chronically ill persons or children under 6 months. The first 500,000 vaccines will arrive at the start of December. Additionally, Croatian health officials are communicating with the public to ease panic about the recent outbreaks. Public health officials are urging citizens to not visit doctors and hospitals unless they are showing severe symptoms such as high fever or difficulty breathing. They also focused their public information campaign on preventative measures.

¶4. (U) Croatian print media, however, has increased the public's anxiety about influenza through sensational coverage of odd stories related to the flu, some of which cannot be substantiated. For example, one leading newspaper published an article about a village priest who counseled parishioners to avoid any flu vaccines and to await further instructions from the Vatican on how to proceed. Other media articles falsely claimed that Croatia would close its border with Serbia because of H1N1. In many cases, while the headlines are exaggerated, the articles mostly quote doctors and experts calling on the public to take preventative measures and not to panic. Television coverage remains more measured with numerous interviews with local doctors repeating the same message, asking people to take preventative measures and not to visit their doctors unless seriously ill.

COMMENT

15. (U) The GOC is in control of the H1N1 and other influenza situation. Public health officials have been proactive in both their response to informing the public about prevention and treatment, as well as on how to cope with increasing infections. However, in the face of sensational media coverage, there has been additional effort needed to calm public anxiety and urge against unnecessary doctor's visits.

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